PART 3
Defining At-Risk Communities

Top-line findings

- **Children with high needs are not evenly distributed across Iowa.** By grouping counties based on population and proximity to major cities, strong patterns emerge, with children living in the outlying metropolitan counties adjacent to large cities faring the best on average, and children in central-city counties and regional centers—counties anchored by towns of 10,000 to 50,000 people—often faring the worst.

- **Different levels of geography show distinct patterns of risk.** Analysis of well-being indicators at the county level often shows risks that are relatively dispersed around the state. But when analysis turns to the much small-scale census tracts, high-poverty neighborhoods—the vast majority located in Iowa's largest cities—stand out as having the greatest challenges by far.

- **Despite variations, there is opportunity to better support children in every Iowa community.** Even in relatively unstressed communities, there are many families struggling to afford child care and other basic needs, juggle work and school commitments or manage special health needs.

Identifying the role communities play in ensuring healthy young child development is an important charge of this report. Some places in Iowa have more resources available for young children and their families than others, and some are safer and more prosperous. Communities have different strengths and needs.

This report looks at communities and neighborhoods in Iowa in two ways, and at two different levels of geography.

First, the report examines "risk" at the county level, based on eight separate community indicators drawn from census and Kids Count data:

- Single parenting
- Females of child-rearing age with less than high school
- Young children below 100 percent of poverty

- High school graduation rate
- Child abuse and neglect rate
- Young children participating in preschool
- Low weight births
- Unemployment rate

It flags those counties showing the highest degree of stress on each indicator, as measured by a value more than one standard deviation "worse" than the state average (see Table 3.1). It then sums the number of "high risk" flags for each county. The results show a great range of county-level stress. Of Iowa's 99 counties, 45 rank as "high risk" on none of the eight variables, and 24 rank as "high risk" on only one. The remaining 30 counties register as "high risk" on two or more variables, including six that are flagged on four or five of the eight.

Statewide patterns vary by indicator. Rural counties, for instance, are most prominent among those whose parents reported their 3- to 5-year-olds did not participate in preschool, while the state's regional centers are most prominent in those with high rates of single parenting and poverty.

Taken together, all but one of the six counties with the greatest number of "risk" factors fall into the central city metropolitan and regional center groups (two and three counties, respectively).

County-level analysis alone can miss pockets of extreme need that remain 'hidden' in countywide averages.

County-level analysis is a useful tool, particularly for an organization like Early Childhood Iowa, whose local activities are organized by county or groups of counties. But county-level analysis alone can miss pockets of extreme need that remain "hidden" in countywide averages.

To get at these smaller areas of need, the report also includes a finer-grain level of geographic analysis. It identifies census tracts with very high rates of overall poverty (30 percent or more), then eliminates those where more than 30 percent of the residents were age 18-24—that is,

tracts where high poverty levels reflected a large number of college students. It then examines other socio-economic indicators in the 32 remaining high-poverty census tracts. These tracts, all located in the state's central cities (27 tracts) or regional centers (five tracts), show stress across multiple variable on all measures except employment, they are dramatically more stressed than the state as a whole. , and are in fact very different in composition and education, income, wealth and social factors from the rest of the state. Their residents are disproportionately of color and/or Hispanic origin and disproportionally young.

Community building, as well as individual services and supports to families, and additional public attention is likely to be needed to respond to these young children and their needs. (The next installment of this needs assessment will focus on the availability of services for young children and their families and where additional supports are needed.)

While there are clear differences among counties and even more pronounced differences within some neighborhoods, all counties have areas of need and concern regarding their young children and their families. Even the most stable Iowa counties are home to families struggling to afford child care, juggle work and school commitments or manage special health needs.

In the outlying metropolitan counties, for example, more than 10 percent of young children live in poverty; nearly 30 percent live in families with incomes under 200 percent of poverty; and one in five live with a single parent.

Reviewing information at both the county and subcounty level can help to focus attention on particular specific concerns facing children and particular neighborhoods requiring much more focused and intensive intervention.